DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 038 699 CG 005 257

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| AUTHOR | Brown, Robert D. |
| TITLE | Parental Perceptions of University Life and Their Characterizations of Their College Sons and Daughters. |
| INSTITUTION | Nebraska Univ., Lincoln. |
| PUB DATE | [70] |
| NOTE | 16p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Dr. Robert D. Brown, 108 Administration Building, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508 |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.90 |
| DESCRIPTORS | *College Environment, College Students, *Environmental Research, Parent Attitudes, *Parent Reaction, *Perception, Student Characteristics, Student Opinion, *Student Reaction, Universities |

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to: (1) assess parental perceptions of a university environment and compare them with those of students; (2) compare the perceptions of parents of entering freshmen and upperclassmen; and (3) investigate whether or not parental perceptions of the university were independent of how they characterize their own college sons or daughters. Parents completed the College and University Environment Scales and the Adjective Check List on which they described their children. There were wide discrepancies between the environmental perceptions of parents and students, but few differences between parents of entering freshmen and upperclassmen. There were a number of significant relationships between campus perceptions and college son or daughter characterizations for parents of upperclassmen, but only one for freshmen parents. A number of possible reasons are suggested for these results, including selective reporting by students to parents, and reduction of cognitive dissonance on the part of parents. (Author)

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# Parental Perceptions of University Life and Their Characterizations of Their College Sons and Daughters

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How much do parents really know about the campus climate and the pressures the campus environment places upon the students, their sons and daughters? Is there a relationship between parental perceptions of university life and how they characterize their own sons and daughters? Having a child attending a college, probably operationally means an occasional visit to the campus and being slightly more attentive to newspaper stories about the college. However, reports about campus life from their sons or daughters could well be selective and biased, as well as limited. Because of these influences the parental image of the campus may be no more accurate than that of the general public. It may be shaped as much by their image of their own college son or daughter, as it is by what they actually know about the environment.

The purpose of this investigation was threefold: 1) to assess parental perceptions of a university environment and compare these perceptions with those of students, 2) to compare the perceptions of entering freshmen with those of parents of upperclassmen, and 3) to investigate whether or not parental perceptions of the university were independent of how they characterized their own college sons or daughters.

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Most of the research related to these questions has focused on student populations. Degree of familiarity with the college, for example, has been found to have an impact upon how students perceive the campus. When the viewpoints of freshmen and upperclassmen are compared, freshmen are found to have idealistic and unrealistic views of the campus (Berdie, 1966; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Johnson & Kurpius, 1967). Pace (1966) reports that the pattern of environmental perceptions for different groups of students are essentially the same, but on the basis of several studies, he strongly recommends using third semester students as reporters. The same pattern might be predicted for parents. Parents of entering freshmen might be expected to reflect views of the campus environment similar to those of the general public (Evans, 1970), whereas parents of upperclassmen should be better informed and more accurate.

The possibility that parental perceptions of the campus are related to characterizations of their own sons or daughters rests on several premises. There is, first of all, the possibility that most parental perceptions of the campus are based on rather limited input, perhaps much of it from what they hear from their own children. If there is a perception among parents that the environmental press is strong in the scholarship arena, for example, this might be partly because of verbal exchanges with their own college student. It might also, however, be related to how they view their own son or daughter. In an effort to maintain congruency between the two perceptions, of their child and of the college, parents might be projecting characteristics of their child on to their view of the campus (Bruner, 1957).

Among students, there is some evidence that there is an interaction between student personality characteristics and their perceptions of the campus climate. Yonge (1968) and Marks (1968) both set out to test whether student characteristics and their perceptions of the environment were related, or whether they were two separate and distinct domains. Both found personality and motivation to be related to environmental perceptions. Whereas Berdie (1967) ascribed differences between different campus groups to the actual many-faceted aspects of the university community, Yonge and Marks suggested that in reality there were as many versions of the campus which were functionally different, as there were individual students.

This evidence at least raises the possibility that students could be biased reporters of the campus scene to their parents and consequently parents are likely to see the campus through the eyes of their son or daughter.

## Instruments

A revised version of the College and University Environment Scales, Second Edition (CUES) and the Adjective Check List (ACL) were chosen as the instruments for this study. The CUES has been used in a growing number of campus environment studies and its five scales: Practicality, Community, Scholarship, Awareness and Propriety, provide data based on factorially derived dimensions, which collectively provide a comprehensive profile of the campus climate. The ACL is a brief, non-threatening personality inventory yielding a profile based on Murray's 15 need-press personality dimensions (Murray, 1938). Its format makes it particularly suitable and adaptable for third person descriptions.

The CUES was revised so that items with references to "here" or "at this campus" were reworded to read "at the University" or "at the University of Nebraska." This resulted in changes in 10 of the 100 items of the CUES. Provision was also made for respondents to indicate their degree of certainty on a four point scale (0 = a guess, 3 = very sure).

With the ACL were special instructions asking respondents to check the adjectives which best described their son or daughter who was entering college or now attending. Standard scores are provided for each scale which are pro-rated depending upon the total number of adjectives checked (Gough and Heilbrun, 1965).

## Sample and Procedure

The CUES and ACL were mailed to two random samples of parents (100 parents of freshmen and 100 parents of upperclassmen) of University of Nebraska students. Usable returns were obtained from 160 parents, 85 freshmen parents and 75 parents of upperclassmen. Demographic data were also collected on the parents and comparisons between parents of freshmen and upperclassmen yielded no significant differences on size of home town, educational background of the father, or distance from the University. Only those with one child in college were included in the sample.

Student CUES profiles collected over a three year period were available on 350 students, who represented various living unit complexes. A random sample of 25 profiles from this population were combined with a random sample of current student profiles to make up a student picture of the campus environment.

## Scoring and Analysis

The CUES scoring procedure outlined by Pace (1969) was intended to obtain a consensus description of the environment rather than an individual score. A score is obtained by adding the number of items answered by 66 percent or more of the respondents in the keyed direction, subtracting the number of items answered by 33 percent or fewer in the keyed direction, and adding 20 points to the difference. This procedure was employed for purposes of comparing student and parent profiles. The responses of individuals were also scored in the traditional psychometric fashion for the purpose of obtaining individual scores. Chi-square analyses were made in order to determine whether or not there were significant differences in the responses of parent and student groups to individual items of the CUES.

The individual parental portrayals of the campus environment on the five CUES scales were correlated with the standard scores of the ACL descriptions of their sons or daughters. Separate correlations were computed for parents of freshmen and parents of upperclassmen.

# Results

## Comparison of Parents and Students

Table 1 presents the CUES scores for parents and students using Pace's consensus scoring procedure. In all instances, whether it was freshmen parents or parents of upperclassmen, the parents portrayal of the campus environment ranked substantially higher than the student portrayal when these scores were compared to the reference group of 100 colleges. The pattern was consistent for all five environmental scales with the greatest discrepancies appearing on the Scholarship and Community scales.

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Analysis of responses to individual items on the CUES revealed that there were 27 items on which both two-thirds of the parents and the students agreed. There were 45 items on which the majority of students held different opinions than the majority of parents and chi-square analyses resulted in significant differences for 27 of these items. Most of the items for which there were both parental and student consensus centered on aspects of the environment related to campus rules and regulations, and on whether or not "good fun and school spirit" pervaded the campus scene. These items were chiefly from the Practicality and Propriety scales.

CUES items on which there were significant differences of opinion focused on topics related to the Scholarship and Awareness scales. Parents tended to see the environment reflecting a much greater emphasis on scholarship, intellectual activities and cultural events than did the students. Students saw the campus as less academic and more restrictive than did parents.

Comparison of Parents of Freshmen and Upperclassmen

Table 2 presents the CUES scores for parents of freshmen and upperclassmen for the five scales along with certainty scores; all scored in the traditional psychometric fashion and reported in terms of means and standard deviations. There was a significant difference between the two parental groups on the Practicality scale with the freshmen parents perceiving the campus as more collegiate and vocational,

as indicated by this scale. There were no other significant scale score differences. As might be expected, there were significant differences between the two parental groups on their degree of certainty about their responses for four of the scales, all except Practicality. The parents of upperclassmen were more certain of their responses than were freshmen parents. In general, the certainty responses of both groups were between having "some idea" about the item and being "pretty sure," as the certainty scale responses were defined.

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Item by item comparisons resulted in few differences between the two parental groups. There were 66 items on which two-thirds of both groups agreed and 9 items on which more than 90% of both parental groups agreed. There were 13 items for which the majority of one parental group answered differently from the other, but only six of these differences were significant. These items related to the neatness of student rooms, faculty interest in students' personal problems and whether or not the school helped students get acquainted.

In general, the results indicated that the responses of the two parental groups were remarkably similar. Freshmen parents tended to see the campus as more collegiate and vocational, were somewhat more idealistic in their views, and were less certain of their views. However, the overall pattern of responses was very similar.

Relationship of Parent Perceptions of the Campus to Characterizations of their Sons or Daughters.

The question of whether parental perceptions were independent of their perceptions of their sons or daughters was examined separately for parents of freshmen and parents of upperclassmen. Table 3 presents the correlations between ACL and CUES scores for freshmen parents and Table 4 the counterparts for upperclassmen parents. Only one correlation, between Practicality and Heterosexuality, was significant for the parents of freshmen. However, for the parents of upperclassmen 20 out of the 100 comparisons yielded significant correlations. The significant correlations clustered around the CUES scales of Community and Propriety. These results suggest that for parents of upperclassmen their perceptions of some dimensions of the campus atmosphere and their descriptions of their sons or daughters were not independent.

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INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

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INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

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## Discussion

The results of the comparisons of CUES profiles between parents and students, and between parents of freshmen and upperclassmen suggest that this instrument can be a useful device for determining parental perceptions of the campus environment. The consensus among the parents

was greater than it was for the students and though the degree of certainty varied depending upon whether or not they were parents of entering freshmen or of returning students, the overall level of certainty indicated that respondents felt they were doing more than just guessing. Though there were significant differences between the two parental groups in their degree of certainty, their perceptions of the environment were quite similar.

The tremendous discrepancies between student and parent perceptions of the environment, regardless of the experience (new or returning) their son or daughter had with the University, suggest that even though parents may have a "reporter on the scene", their perceptions are still not congruent with those of students. Parents of upperclassmen remained idealistic, seeing the campus as an intellectual beehive and the college administration as highly benevolent. This raises questions about how much students talk with their parents about campus life, aside from their own goals and academic achievements. How much do they discuss what happens day-by-day in their classes, the kind of examinations they have, or what extra-classroom activities are like? If communication takes place between parents and students about campus life, the lack of differences in this study between freshmen and upperclassmen parents suggests that it has little impact upon how parents perceive the campus environment.

The cluster of relationships between upperclassmen parents' perception of the Community and Propriety dimensions of the campus and their ACL characterizations of their sons and daughters center around personal characteristics related to task-orientations and

interpersonal relationships. Thus, parents who saw the campus as high in Propriety, which suggests a campus atmosphere that is polite proper, conventional, cautious and where group standards are important, also saw their son or daughter as moderate (low Autonomy), conformist (low Aggression), self-denying (high Deference and Defensiveness), as well as hard-working (high Achievement), patient (high Endurance and Self-Control), and organized (high Order). These characteristics are quite compatible with an environment portrayed as being high on the Propriety CUES scale.

The relationships between the CUES Community scale and the ACL descriptions for the upperclassmen parents are less easily seen as compatible, unless the campus community is seen as striving, and achievement and goal-oriented. Parents who saw their children as hard-working (high Achievement), forceful and outgoing (high Dominance), responsible (high Endurance), organized (high Order) and confident (high Self-Confidence), also tended to see the campus as friendly, cohesive and group oriented. This pattern is not contradictory, as there appears to be more of a strain of optimism, idealism and trust associated with this ACL profile than aggressive competitiveness.

The finding that perceptions of freshmen parents were on the whole independent of their characterizations of their children, whereas those of upperclassmen parents were not, suggests possibilities that must remain speculations at this time. Marks (1968) found that uncertainty about the environment in a student population was more likely to lead to portraying the campus as congruent with certain personal characteristics than was certainty. But in this study the relationships between parental portrayals of their sons or daughters and their

perceptions of the campus were significant only for the group of parents who were more certain of their responses about the environment. If cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) between parental self-image and their characterizations of the campus were a factor, one would expect this to be equally true for parents of freshmen and parents of upperclassmen.

For parents of upperclassmen the need to reduce dissonance might well be operating in a different fashion, as they attempt to put together what they hear about the campus from their son or daughter, what kind of person they picture them to be, and their own image of the campus environment. It is possible that the students who had been on campus for several years were selective reporters, discussing aspects of campus life that concerned them the most, and which also reflected their own interests and characteristics. It is also possible, that parents were selective listeners as well.

Final comment: Just as it is important to understand student perceptions of the campus environment because of interactions between these perceptions and behaviors, it is also important to determine what influences outsiders' perceptions of the same environment. Parents would appear to be a critical, as well as a long neglected population. Further research might well follow the pattern of that done with student populations, with initial efforts assessing perceptions among different sub-populations, such as urban and rural area parents, college and non-college educated parents; and later efforts exploring possible individual characteristics related to environmental perceptions. In both instances, more attention needs to be given to ways of changing the environment and making perceptions more realistic.

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Table 1

CUES Consensus Scores and Percentile Ranks

for Parents and Students*

| | Freshmen Parents N= 85 | | Upperclassmen Parents N= 75 | | Total Parents N= 160 | | Students N= 50 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Scale | Score | PR | Score | PR | Score | PR | Score | PR |
| Practicality | 31 | 95 | 31 | 95 | 32 | 97 | 24 | 78 |
| Scholarship | 37 | 98 | 36 | 93 | 38 | 98 | 21 | 41 |
| Community | 31 | 78 | 28 | 68 | 29 | 74 | 20 | 26 |
| Awareness | 34 | 94 | 34 | 94 | 35 | 94 | 21 | 62 |
| Propriety | 22 | 79 | 20 | 73 | 21 | 75 | 17 | 57 |

* Scoring procedure and norms are provided in Pace (1969).

Table 2

CUES Scores for Parents of Freshmen and Upperclassmen

| Scale | Parents of Freshmen N= 85 | | Parents of Upperclassmen N= 75 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | t |
| Practicality | 13.71 | 2.44 | 12.80 | 2.41 | 2.51* |
| Practicality (Certainty) | 35.21 | 10.89 | 37.73 | 9.56 | 1.65 |
| Scholarship | 15.00 | 3.25 | 14.83 | 2.96 | .36 |
| Scholarship (Certainty) | 32.59 | 11.10 | 36.73 | 10.30 | 2.60* |
| Community | 13.67 | 3.39 | 13.06 | 3.48 | 1.19 |
| Community (Certainty) | 31.07 | 11.99 | 36.59 | 10.77 | 5.02** |
| Awareness | 15.09 | 2.97 | 14.81 | 3.53 | .58 |
| Awareness (Certainty) | 28.75 | 11.86 | 33.58 | 11.03 | 2.82** |
| Propriety | 9.88 | 3.09 | 9.91 | 2.97 | .06 |
| Propriety (Certainty) | 28.57 | 11.52 | 34.05 | 10.08 | 3.38** |
| Total Certainty | 155.52 | 52.35 | 180.81 | 46.35 | 5.16** |

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Table 3

Correlations Between CUES and
Adjective Check List for Parents of Freshmen

| Need Scales | Practicality | Scholarship | Community | Awareness | Propriety | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Achievement | .040 | .130 | .039 | .149 | .034 | 55.43 | 8.17 |
| Dominance | -.072 | .161 | .033 | .127 | .111 | 55.19 | 8.44 |
| Endurance | .174 | .173 | .210 | .136 | .123 | 58.19 | 8.70 |
| Order | .200 | .130 | .149 | .112 | .162 | 54.95 | 7.84 |
| Intraception | .047 | .133 | -.024 | .102 | .042 | 51.37 | 8.61 |
| Nurturance | -.047 | .060 | .006 | -.096 | -.110 | 53.35 | 9.17 |
| Affiliation | -.121 | .141 | .070 | -.064 | .032 | 51.59 | 9.99 |
| Heterosexuality | -.252* | -.043 | .010 | -.157 | -.118 | 50.60 | 9.75 |
| Exhibition | -.193 | .119 | .050 | -.006 | .007 | 49.67 | 8.17 |
| Autonomy | .052 | .112 | .039 | .121 | -.109 | 46.91 | 8.44 |
| Aggression | -.074 | -.048 | -.034 | .077 | .037 | 48.31 | 8.70 |
| Change | .004 | .011 | -.179 | .018 | -.163 | 43.67 | 8.85 |
| Succurance | -.139 | -.089 | -.047 | -.062 | .043 | 43.64 | 7.78 |
| Abasement | .037 | -.151 | -.073 | -.090 | -.045 | 47.28 | 6.72 |
| Deference | .008 | -.064 | .029 | -.085 | .021 | 52.12 | 7.89 |
| **Supplementary Scales** | | | | | | | |
| Defensiveness | .042 | .203 | .055 | .085 | -.030 | 54.75 | 7.87 |
| Self Confidence | -.097 | .137 | .015 | .129 | -.114 | 52.08 | 8.26 |
| Self Control | .172 | .045 | .087 | .076 | .068 | 56.29 | 8.75 |
| Lability | -.151 | .031 | -.076 | .065 | -.068 | 45.43 | 10.71 |
| Personal Adjustment | .072 | .007 | .022 | .079 | .029 | 53.21 | 8.95 |

* Significant at .05 level

Table 4

Correlations Between CUES and
Adjective Check List for Parents of Upperclassmen

| Need Scales | Practicality | Scholarship | Community | Awareness | Propriety | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Achievement | .025 | .090 | .359** | .149 | .261* | 56.53 | 9.56 |
| Dominance | .053 | .124 | .366** | .146 | .158 | 54.78 | 7.91 |
| Endurance | -.075 | .066 | .291* | .256* | .322** | 56.86 | 10.79 |
| Order | .049 | .052 | .424** | .214 | .376** | 54.63 | 10.97 |
| Intraception | -.148 | -.097 | .046 | .191 | .237* | 51.45 | 12.48 |
| Nurturance | -.123 | -.021 | .057 | .195 | .240** | 52.86 | 13.69 |
| Affiliation | -.070 | .037 | .114 | .211 | .374** | 50.41 | 12.89 |
| Heterosexuality | .099 | .119 | .106 | .153 | .093 | 51.48 | 9.38 |
| Exhibition | .243* | .171 | .012 | .012 | -.100 | 50.06 | 9.56 |
| Autonomy | .056 | .038 | -.054 | -.160 | -.427** | 47.50 | 11.42 |
| Aggression | .133 | .069 | .003 | -.160 | -.309* | 49.14 | 13.05 |
| Change | .153 | .148 | -.031 | -.145 | -.095 | 44.45 | 8.79 |
| Succurance | .067 | .049 | -.194 | -.184 | .039 | 45.38 | 8.30 |
| Abasement | -.075 | -.104 | -.161 | -.016 | .181 | 47.72 | 6.75 |
| Deference | -.182 | -.102 | -.039 | .117 | .367** | 51.33 | 10.28 |
| **Supplementary Scales** | | | | | | | |
| Defensiveness | -.055 | -.028 | .243* | .146 | .363** | 54.47 | 10.92 |
| Self Confidence | .174 | .163 | .305* | .101 | .027 | 52.88 | 8.24 |
| Self Control | -.157 | -.063 | .131 | .160 | .303* | 56.03 | 11.73 |
| Lability | -.042 | .162 | -.074 | .043 | -.048 | 47.38 | 8.51 |
| Personal Adjustment | -.125 | -.090 | .132 | .227 | .259* | 51.53 | 12.16 |

* Significant at .05 level
** Significant at .01 level